

## POINT OF VIEW

# Trivialities Cause Johnson Press Strain

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Probably no President has ever told newsmen in so many different ways so much of what he thinks about things that matter in the long run as has President Johnson.

What matters most to him is getting things done to carry forward what he calls the wars he likes to fight—such as wars against poverty, waste, ignorance, disease, unemployment, ugliness in America, and war against war itself.

About these, and most other things of legitimate concern to newspaper readers, Johnson provides a flood of information. He likes to talk with newsmen, on or off the record, in press conferences or walks with groups or individual discussions. He encourages his assistants, department and agency heads to talk to the press.

## Invited to Cabinet Room

He has invited reporters into the White House Cabinet Room after the last two Cabinet meetings to hear members of his Cabinet report on what was discussed in the session with him.

Never in the memory of veterans in the White House press room has anything like this ever happened before.

And, until Johnson did it last Thursday, no one ever would have thought a President would read to reporters in advance of a Cabinet meeting the official agenda for that session—who was going to discuss what.

## Dramatizes Desire

This is just one of many new ways Johnson has dramatized his professed desire to give reporters covering the White House and the government generally the fullest possible access to information that can be made public without endangering national security.

Despite all this, there is an occasional epidemic of newspaper stories and columns indicating strains in Johnson's relations with the press.

## It's Up to President

Most of the complaints involve mechanics or procedure rather than substance. There are more gripes about relatively unimportant things that affect the convenience of reporters than there are about

access to information involving government policies.

MOST REPORTERS concede that it is entirely up to the President how he puts out news—whether he holds a press conference announced in advance, calls them into his office without advance notice, invites them to walk around the grounds with him or whatever.

They feel it is not their function to try to tell any President how he should keep the public informed, but to adjust themselves to his way of doing it.

There seems to be an unfortunate lack of understanding, however, between the President and the bulk of the White House press corps in regard to advance notice of his movements out of Washington.

Johnson seems to resent such questions as whether he is going to his Texas ranch next weekend and, if so, when he plans to leave.

## Appear Trivial

To him, such questions apparently appear so trivial that a newspaperman shouldn't waste time asking them that could be devoted to more important issues like the war in Viet Nam and the status of his voting rights legislation in Congress.

But most reporters who ask about the President's travel plans are not thinking so much about writing a story as about:

Can I tell my wife we can accept that invitation to dinner Saturday night?

Will I be here to sow that grass seed Sunday or had we better hire it done?

Should I get the office to send over some expense money?

Should I pack a bag and bring it with me when I come to work Thursday—or Friday?

## Seeing Personal Guidance

But Johnson might well avoid generating some unnecessary ill-will among the men whose jobs require them to travel with him if he would realize that when they ask about his travel plans they are more interested at the moment in guidance for themselves and their families than

in writing a story about where he is going.

Most reporters realize that any President must maintain complete flexibility about his movements.

If an anticipated departure And 413 newsmen have had individual visits with the President.

from Washington is kept unannounced until the last moment—as was Johnson's flight to Texas for the weekend last Friday—there probably are good reasons for it.

Perhaps the President knows something they don't—and shouldn't know—that indicates something could happen somewhere in the world that would make it essential for him to remain in Washington rather than make the trip they believe he hopes to make.

The gripes of newsmen tend at times to obscure genuine feelings of respect for the way Johnson is handling problems.

## Not Doing Justice

And reports indicating trouble in Johnson's press relations do not do justice to his record as regards the important problem in this field—access to information of concern to newspaper readers.

During the nearly 17 months he has been in office, Johnson has held 40 on-the-record press conferences—41 if you count yesterday's personal announcement in Texas of the appointment of retired Vice Adm. William F. Raborn Jr., as Central Intelligence Agency director.

He also has had 20 meetings with the press that he describes as informal news conferences. And he has walked and talked with reporters around the White House grounds 11 times.

Five times groups of newsmen, involving 64 individuals, have had "background" discussions with Johnson.

As a result, newspaper readers are kept better informed than probably ever before about what their President thinks about various problems from time to time.

In addition to his own accessibility, the record of press conferences by his cabinet officers is impressive.

A compilation at the White House shows that since Johnson became President, cabinet officers have held 453 press conferences compared to 344 for a similar period under President Kennedy.